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BEYOND BACK TO NATURE: ECOSOPHY REIN-
VENTS ITSELF AS ALWAYS

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REVIEWS OF:

Derek Wall. *Green History: A reader in environmental literature, philosophy and politics*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 273 pages. Index, bibliography.

David Pepper. *Ecosocialism: From deep ecology to social justice*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 266 pages. Index, bibliography.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. London: Zed Books, 1994. 328 pages. Index.

A. Dwight Baldwin, Jr., Judith de Luce, and Carl Pletsch, editors. *Beyond Preservation: Restoring and Inventing Landscapes*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 280 pages. Index.

A perspective on the world is only as strong as its limitations. In ecosophy we are supposed to learn how humanity fits into nature, and hope for guidance on how to act to improve the fit. Each year the field reaches out to consider new and further-flung perspectives, and we hope this is done without watering down the basic quest, the central investigation.

If ecosophy is to be a science, it is a value-laden one. If it is literature, it is an experimental genre that knows our language is presently not prepared to speak emphatically of our link to what surrounds us. If it is politics, it tends toward the utopian. Those of us in the midst of it do believe ideas can change the world. And we are constantly reformulating, testing, expressing, looking for more roots and branches of these ideas in the past, the present, and the future of cultures all across the globe. This latest crop of books suggests some of the changes and new routes that have come to the field. Though none uses the technical term 'ecosophy,' they are all about expanding the discourse that relates human to earth so that we will have greater understanding, and have the footholds in place for a better world.

Be Not Afraid to Look Back

We have all by now heard the most common criticisms of environmental thinking: it is elitist, racially segregated around the color white, politically naive, ahistorical, substituting one part of the problem for the whole problem, mis-

guided, innocently religious (looking for God here on Earth!), and generally unprepared to tackle the problems it claims to take hold of. Well, Derek Wall's *Green History* gives us ammunition against these well-intended but straw man attacks by showing how ecosophy has a very real and well-documented history, with relevant readings from the ancient Greeks straight through all our recorded centuries. These problems have been around for generations, and we can learn from how they were depicted throughout.

It is an excellent idea, and a much-needed sourcebook. Wall's excerpts are generally but a page or two in length, so it is more like a catalog of possible accounts than an encyclopedic sourcebook. We learn basic hints of how to ecologically estimate ancient cultures: brief references from Plato, Lucretius, and contemporary articles on the significance of lead poisoning in the decimation of the Roman Empire. The obligatory paragraphs from Bacon's *New Atlantis*, a curious defense from President Andrew Jackson on why we shouldn't worry about the extinction of the "aborigines of this country." The idea of the book seems better than its execution, for it often seems there is little rhyme or reason to his selections - they float from one to another, the rambling mark of a 'generalist' text, a fault found in many works in our discipline, spread too thin by trying to cover too much.

Still, there are many intriguing references that would set any inquiring mind toward further surprises. I certainly didn't know that Augustine dealt with the Gaia hypothesis in his *City of God*:

Surely the earth, which we see full of its own living creatures, is *one*; but for all that, it is but a mighty mass among the elements, and the lowest part of the world. Why, then, would they have it to be a goddess? Is it because it is fruitful? Why, then, are not men rather held to be gods, who render it fruitful by cultivating it; but although they plough it, do not adore it? (p. 79)

Indeed. Therein lies the problem, quite simply stated along time ago. And D.H. Lawrence finds Gaia Americanized from Pan through transcendentalism into Whitman:

And then he crossed over to the young United States: I mean Pan did. Suddenly he gets a new name. He becomes the Oversoul, the Allness of everything 'I am All, and All is Me.' That is, 'I am Pan, and Pan is me. The old goat-legged gentleman from Greece thoughtfully strokes his beard, and answers: 'All A is B, but all B is not A.' Aristotle did not live for nothing. All Walt is Pan, but all Pan is not Walt. (p. 86)

Many intriguing tidbits like this. We've been there before! Novelty is not the key to deeper ecologies - nor is any ancient wisdom we could recover. What we

are after his a *historical wisdom*, and there are many thinkers and doers we may learn from if we choose to toss off our arrogance and look back.

This book does not present a detailed study of the changing attitudes toward nature through time, as one finds in Keith Thomas' superbly researched *Man and the Natural World* (Penguin, 1983), which tells of the vast changes from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in the way the population spoke of the surrounding world. Nor is it a well-planned historical overview or anthology textbook. It's a loose and engaging sourcebook of ideas, fuel for arguments, antecedents to deepen a stance. Roots of ecofeminism in Sappho and Emma Goldman! Social ecology in Kropotkin, Earth First! in William Blake: ¡PO-EM! To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour. A robin redbreast in a cage Puts all Heaven in a rage. (p. 71)

The book tries hard to free environmentalism from class or race stereotypes. In fact the very first essay is an article by Alice Walker on the MOVE collective in Philadelphia, a radical black vegetarian commune that was bombed out of existence by the FBI. The attack on the house ignited a fire that roared through a black, middle-class neighborhood and destroyed more than sixty houses belonging to innocent people. The point is to show that radical eco-types are not all the distraught children of privileged upbringings. You don't have to be rich to think like this! Well taken, but the essay is more about social protest than caring for the earth - it probably does not deserve so much prominence as the initial piece in the collection. A later piece by Alice Walker, on longing to die of old age instead of cancer seems much more to the point.

An anthology like this will always be more the work of personal choice than a comprehensive sweep. So this one is quirky, but thought-provoking. Often having history to consider as raw material is more informative than a clearly one-sided view. The latter leads too quickly into ideology. *Green History* is a useful volume on any environmentalist bookshelf, reminding us where we have come from, suggesting places to go.

You Have Nothing to Lose But Your Woo-Woo

Of course, some may prefer starting with a sustained argument to wash their history down with. That's what you get in *Eco-socialism: from deep ecology to social justice*. The title says it all, from subject matter to perspective. I've long been a fan of David Pepper's last book, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism* (Routledge, 1984), which provided a dense, schematic, and highly readable account of the various stances leading up to the current eco-movement. The new book began as a revision of the first, but ended up as an extended commentary on the last two chapters, a conclusion on why Marxism is the answer.

Now people who believe Marxism is the answer believe Marxism is the answer, and there's no convincing them otherwise. Never mind the historical failure of Marx-inspired regimes - they just weren't executed correctly. The whole world must become capitalist, after all, before the workers will be savvy enough to truly unite. Die-hard Marxists, most living either in Britain or various African nations, will not be deterred. "The materialist explanation of history is the deepest theory of social change we have," they intone. "It is down to earth where other theories are up in the clouds."

Marx was a genius, and he explained many things. But the universality of his theory as a kind of religion has never seemed compelling to me. Of course, from this perspective Pepper points out how anthropocentrism is the solution, not the problem, and present environmental politics is simplistic because it is overly individualistic in approach, relying too much on anarchism for its notions of collective action.

Now I agree with that last idea, but I think Marxism, although not simple, is also idealistic and quite removed from the realities of our rapidly changing world. Far more intriguing are the less monolithic forms of socialism suggested by William Morris and Peter Kropotkin, and these are also aptly introduced by Pepper, though he ultimately rejects them. They seem free of the need to explain everything before encouraging action. In their small-scale utopias, they suggest ideals that are realistic, and might be applicable without an overriding ideology. For Marxism to have the same potential, it must begin by admitting it cannot always be right.

Well, that's my opinion. What about Pepper's? Always a lover of diagrams, he has a sneaky linear list of polarities with "traditional conservatives" (deep ecology) at one end and "revolutionary socialists" (ecosocialism) at the other, both labelled 'radical,' while in the middle are market liberals, welfare liberals, and democratic socialists - all 'reformist.' By radical he rightly means "wanting to go back to the root of society and change it fundamentally in some ways, and quite rapidly." (p. 47)

Thus deep ecology appears conservative in his schema, na_vely yearning for human lifestyles based on nature and romantically longing for a previous tribal idyll. In contrast, only socialism knows that environmental ills are specific to capitalism, aware of poverty, squalor, and social injustice, looking forward and not back. He is not surprisingly suspicious of "New Age irrationalism, which all mainstream greens have tendencies towards," (p. 47) what Murray Bookchin was once fond of calling "woo-woo." Pepper calls mysticism conservative, for his socialism has not so much a human or sensitive face as a rational, calculated plan for sound and exact transformation of the world. Sound familiar?

The advantage of Marxian thinking is its potential for precision. Its shortcoming, like all dogmatic systems, is its inability to accept what it cannot explain. Marx itself tried to explain the spirituality of material production in his early

writings, but Pepper glosses this side over in the name of complete explanation. It's not that Pepper pooh-poohs the possibility for an individual to experience a personal link with the surrounding world - he just doesn't think it is much of a solution to the problem. We are social beings, not solo acts.

Still, if you are not with him, he will not convince you: "Green political naiveté is compounded by a stubborn overemphasis on the power of ideas." (p. 141) For some people values will be seen as relevant to politics: some of these people hold the top executive offices in the government of this country. Pepper might say Clinton and Gore thus ignore the material bases of society, but I don't think so. There is certainly innocence in ecopolitical utopianism, but I'm sorry, ideas *do* help to change the world. And if they do not prescribe the future too tightly, visions can genuinely evolve into realities.

Pepper's survey chapter on the relevance of anarchism to green politics is probably the most helpful. His overviews of history are biased, though extremely well-organized. He points out numerous varieties of anarchism, and explains why ecopolitics are much more closely linked to these traditions than is usually noted. He concludes with a two-column table on why socialism is better than anarchism, and this will certainly encourage debate, not settle the matter simply.

Ecosocialism is definitely an important, well-researched, and blatantly biased work. One could say that its contentions against those of us who believe in the power of individual thought *need to be answered*, but I sadly shake my head in frustration: it's tough to change the mind of a fundamentalist. Better to read Steve Chase's *Defending the Earth: A Debate between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman* (South End Press, 1991) to see how the most vocal opponents in the deep/social ecology debate have softened their stances enough to speak openly to each other, suggesting that real collaboration is possible.

Marxism has certainly been an opiate to many bright intellectuals, and it has also inspired some of the worst governments in history. Still, there is much to learn in Marx's own meticulous analysis on how society is moving. Pepper points us in many valuable directions; unfortunately he denigrates value so much that in the end there is little place for cooperation between these differing views. Marxism encourages dualistic thinking to the nth degree, and this book is full of it. Still, Pepper is a serious thinker, and if you keep your wits about you, you will be able to read through his persuasiveness and be able to draw your own conclusions.

Wild Women Don't Get the Greens

If Marx doesn't get you, there are still many more suppressed voices of the world to choose from. For several years now various alliances between the em-

powerment of women and of nature have been linked together under the name 'ecofeminism.' There have been many anthologies, and recently a few solid monographs. The perspective as a whole has yet to resolve the following fundamental ambiguity: are women to be seen as closer to nature than men, and thus better at understanding its needs, or is that yet another example of gender stereotyping destined for use as part and parcel of repression? Factions both calling themselves ecofeminists have taken both sides here.

I feel most comfortable with the idea that ecofeminism is a feminist perspective on ecological problems. As ecosocialism should be a socialist perspective on the same problems. But every perspective wants to be a movement. They usually claim they are the one and true answer, demanding that the rest of us join their ranks or be damned. And that is always too easy to say, and too difficult to convince people with their own theoretical visions about what comes first on the agenda for global and personal change.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have collaborated in a book simply entitled *Ecofeminism* that deftly manages to sidestep this debate and much of the sectarian squabbling that characterizes any social movement that began in academia. Their book is refreshing in the way it offers a feminist perspective on real, global, and often misunderstood problems that are revealed in practice, not theory. Their ecofeminism is defined as "a perspective which starts from the fundamental necessities of life," (p. 20), and it is desperately needed because it is women who are affected most adversely by environmental damages, such that any picture of renewal must address their needs and include them as leaders in the planning and dreaming process.

The two authors tend to alternate chapters, each writing on what they know best. Shiva's chapters are more grounded in practical tales of the tribulations of developing countries, and how women in particular suffer as a result of misguided policies that seems to promise impoverished nations that they will be able to 'catch up' to the level of the rich countries. She is feminist in the sake of speaking up for women, not arguing along with ideological baggage: "Dams, mines, energy plants, military bases. These are the temples of the new religion called 'development'. What is sacrificed at the altar of this religion is nature's life and people's life." (p. 98) Mies speaks more out of the Northern feminist movement, feeling the need to take a stance on every world disaster. "I met many women in April 1986," she writes, "who felt that the Chernobyl event had destroyed their *joie de vivre*." (p. 92) Nice, poignant, but what of the people *actually hurt* by this event? Chernobyl, for one, may not really be a feminist issue, though it might provide material for feminist speculation. Or perhaps I am not being fair to a genuine sense of identification with the suffering. Then I would want to ask of the Russian casualties, "do *they* identify with my distant unease?"

Mies does do a provocative slam against our familiar notions of the preservation of nature. She calls this all part of the war, and urge to control an image of

the Earth, take it away from the natives, sequester it away only to be looked at or enjoyed, never understood. Shiva reminds us of women's indigenous local knowledge of nature, as scientific resource and also political power. The alternating commentary from the North and the South volleys back and forth toward a common ideal, a "subsistence perspective" which women should have a direct affinity with because they are more concerned with survival than are men who "tend to place money and power above life." (p. 304)

The book suffers from a strange lack of structure because it is not really a collaboration, but more of a shuffled deck of cards of the writings of the two authors. The one chapter they wrote together, on the population issue, is the most integrated, and could have served as a model for the rest of the book. They begin by noting the inadequacies of the United Nations take on this, the most publicly acknowledged of environmental dangers: "All the methods proposed in the UN Report to curb overpopulation are directed toward women. It is stated that most women in the South want fewer children, but the men are not addressed when it comes to contraceptive methods." (p. 279) Their own alternative is nothing less than a new ecophilosophy of sex: "If men and women begin to understand sexual intercourse as a caring and loving interaction with nature, their own and their partner's, then they will be able to find birth control methods which do not harm women." (p. 294) Sexuality should not be seen as an aggressive drive, but instead as a human way of relating to each other and the world. That seems to be one of their most compelling philosophical forays.

Still, within this book we find a woven tapestry of two important feminist thinkers addressing practical issues of development and social change, one from the North, the other from the South. It is to be commended for its practical focus, and it raises the important problems and shows that women have not been considered nearly enough. However, it is not focused enough to pin down a historical and theoretical definition of ecofeminism in a precise way. Someone interested in cutting some of the confusion that presently surrounds ecofeminism would do well to learn from David Pepper's schematic approach to ecosocialism. (But he gets trapped in his ideological framework by an excessive need to prove that his view is the best. A solid and grounded ecofeminism does not have to do that: it should just show that a feminist perspective on environmental problems can make a perceptive and practical difference.)

Mars Here We Come

Finally we come to the one book in the series that deals with a specific part of environmental solution making, not the whole. *Beyond Preservation* is an anthology on a potentially exciting aspect of practical ecology: ecological restoration. This is the part of environmental planning and design focussing on the rebuilding of landscapes according to some natural ideal. Instead of setting a

side areas before they are decimated, restoration believes in the active human hand as an environmental mediator, working to tend the Earth like a benign garden instead of a soulless resource or God-like thing to be revered.

This book is an anthology based on a conference, and a very quirky gathering at that. Nearly all the contributors are professors at Miami University in Ohio, so it is less of a meeting of assembled minds than a harvest from a single farm. All of the essays are written as response to the instigation of Frederick Turner, the poet and polymathic personality known for his epic poems on environmental themes. (He is not to be confused with the historian Frederick Turner, author of *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* and *Rediscovering America: John Muir in His Time and Ours*.)

Turner made a bit of an ecomedia splash with an article in *Harper's* in 1985 suggesting that environmentalists might recast their agenda by thinking of nature as a garden, not a sacred wilderness. This set him up perfectly to be the philosopher of the restoration movement, and these Miami University people have christened him just that. Turner writes that environmentalists have worked too hard at turning their movement into a religion, replacing God with Nature, and then attributed this Nature with various stodgy, fixed, unwavering, narrow moral aspects of the same type that scared many people off from organized religion in the first place. What he asks for, instead, is a more dynamic vision of the surrounding Earth, a place where humans can shape and mold their own place, not afraid of the new and the future.

This much seems quite practical and challenging to the ecodogmas we are all used to. But Turner roves all over the place, skipping like a water-strider across the surface, making interesting patterns, but rarely delving into the profound. The best of his approach might be summarized by his quote from Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, where Perdita declares that she won't have carnations in her garden because they are hybrids, and she wants pure nature, not technology. Polixenes' response says very beautifully how humanity and nature can and must work together: ¶POEM¶Say there be; Yet Nature is made better by no mean But Nature makes that mean; so, o'er that art, Which you say adds to Nature, is an art That Nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry A gentler scion to the wildest stock, And make conceive a bark of baser kind by bud of nobler race. This is an art Which does mend Nature, change it rather; but The art itself is Nature. (p. 55)

You have to hand it to Turner for plucking up Shakespeare as ecophilosopher - those are some good lines. Humanity completing nature only to return to nature. Nice. But nothing about the patent human arrogance that has led more of such attempts to damage than to improvement.

Turner is slippery. He's a wild card whose ideas might be used to justify any position. He ends his introductory essay with a passage from his own epic poem on the gardening of Mars. Indeed, he has been associated with the Biosphere 2

people, who also have Mars as their goal. And what has the imaginary planting of an empty planet have to do with the recovery of our own? I don't know how he managed to slip this bit of poetic self-promotion in.

The choice of essays is curious, and the quality uneven. There is little sense of the humility that should be appropriate for this new, repairing term. What arrogance! How can we 'restore' nature to any previous ideal? Working with it, we should recognize our ability to design as well as the limitations of what intervention can do. This image of Mars planted to flourish as humanity's next resource-planet just does not inspire confidence in me.

There are interesting stories in here, though, as often in a book of many disparate views. Orié Loucks writes how in 1968, the Swiss attempted to transplant a wetland threatened by the extension of a runway at the Zurich airport. The foresight is fascinating, but the expense tremendous and the result predictable: "Mass transplanting can be considered for managed conservation of vegetation, but not as a substitute for conservation." (p. 131) The curious use of the term 'restoration' by strip mining advocates is discussed by Dwight Baldwin, and he suggests that Turner would appeal to our 'innate sense of beauty' to tell us what to do with these apparently ruined places, searching to create a wonderful landscape entirely new once the inner damage has been done.

I suspect aesthetics is not enough to appeal to here. I've seen former strip mines now looking pleasant and green, with houses and roads, only to hear that they sink into rubble a few years later. There's too much of a sense here that restoration makes places that 'looks nice,' rather than constructing ecologies that work well, linking humans to closer to their places. Too much attention to appearance here, not enough dancing in the depths.

Still, it's encouraging to think of Turner's emphasis on cultural change as a route toward ecological reconception. An essay by Ann Cline muses on the possibility for new rituals for the replanting of the prairie that might mirror the insight of the Japanese Tea Ceremony. A "Little Hut on the Prairie" where we might learn to slow down, to transform fodder back to waving straws of grain. It's unclear what this ritual might actually be, but the idea of it gives comfort and sets the mind working. Turner himself is also excited by this notion, but it sets him going in the kind of weird prose that suggests that his is exactly the kind of thinking we ought to avoid:

I believe we can, in the breathing space offered by our ritual delaying tactics, 'reinvest' what we borrow from the residual free energy of the Big Bang, in media that are not subject to the laws of thermodynamics - in other words, in the realm of (crudely) information or (more subtly) spirit. That investment, that bond or bonding, may draw a higher rate of interest, in all senses, than what we pay in terms of entropy. (p. 259)

This is exactly the kind of written mush that interdisciplinary thinkers must strive to avoid. Turner is mixing metaphors like he's about to run out, making a mockery of the serious problems he has chosen to address. This book is laden with the weighty confusion of this man's muddled spirit, and so it takes a potentially important approach to environmental rebuilding and surrounds it with poorly executed philosophy.

There needs to be much more constructive criticism of restoration, dealing specifically with the extent to which it claims to rebuild nature, improve upon it, or design beautiful and functional places where humanity experiences the relation of defining and being defined by nature at one of the same time, as Shakespeare described above as Turner was so good to fish out of the text.

Still, I think about the ecological 'facts' of the region I now write from, New England Coast, Penobscot watershed. It's far more forested than it was a hundred years ago. Back in the woods from this cabin are old quarries, abandoned for at least fifty years, one of which has become a beautiful, Zenlike pond for swimming. Has it been restored, designed, or did it just happen? This gem of a garden is all the closer to nature because it is accidental, left alone, the result of a changing economy and chance. It is a beautiful, leftover landscape that people can continue to relate to, intuitively and with history.

At the same time the fishing industry is in crisis, and there is talk of opening up forestry in the North Woods at much higher intensities. People need to make a living here, and the area can't just be populated by writers hiding in the woods taking refuge from the big cities. The theocratizing of nature is no answer, but wooly-headed futurism is no better.

We need to learn the tools to see nature evolving as we evolve. As material environment, and as idea. Restoration is no enemy to preservation, and both are human attempts to define and make the surrounding world into something that has boundaries. The practice of ecological rebuilding needs to be understood in terms of more practical aesthetics, more experienced reports, and more humble philosophies than *Beyond Preservation* offers.

Better Luck Next Time

Reviewing this new crop of environmental books, blossoming from the garden of cross-pollinated hybrids between disciplines and factions all over the map, I wonder why it is that none of them is as good as it could have been. All deal with important topics, yet all are tragically flawed. The problem is that the more disciplines you try to cover, the less quality control there can be. Who can be trusted to evaluate the curious mixture of history and nature, ecology and socialism, development and feminism, gardening and conservation?

We need a deeper kind of interdisciplinary training, that does not sacrifice the step-by-step study and tradition necessary to learn one part of human knowledge before attempting to link this part to another. We cannot skim the cream off the surface of what matters. As readers we should not be satisfied. We should demand better books, and editors should work much more closely with authors so a good idea becomes more than a good idea, but a fully realized idea.

No writer who wants to apply his or her perspective to a pressing problem can afford to work alone. The complexity of ecosophy demands more than we are presently getting. The first temptation in a relational perspective is to show how all these different views on the same place connect. The biggest challenge is to create one's own sense of depth that forges through the many choices of ways to see things. Unfortunately, we are all too often left alone to figure these things out. So we need to develop greater inner intellectual integrity to plot out ways to deepen our own special tasks. These books are all based on fine premises, but each author could have learned more about the world of discourse as well as the world of life on earth before deciding that their work was done.

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